

2 environmental groups ask BLM to block bulldozing of cattle trail

By Joseph Bauman
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The Sierra Club and the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance are asking the Bureau of Land Management to block construction of a cattle trail on federal land in San Juan County. They claim the bulldozer would open up an area needed as bighorn sheep habitat.

The White Canyon Cattle Co. proposed to bulldoze the eight-mile trail about 12 to 18 feet wide. The area is 10 miles northeast of Natural Bridges National Monument. The trail would extend along the west bench of Gravel Canyon, a tributary of White Canyon, to a spring.

Conservationists charge the route would be easily usable by off-road vehicles, and that would open up the heart of an important bighorn sheep rutting and lambing region.

The BLM is concerned about these issues and will evaluate them carefully before it makes a decision on the proposal, Ed Scherick, the San Juan Resource Area Manager in Monticello, said Monday.

"A bulldozer would clear the trail for most of the first six miles and 'walk' over the remaining two miles with little clearing," says a draft environmental impact statement prepared by the BLM. The route is along an existing cattle trail, where dense vegetation makes driving cattle difficult.

"The proposed trail would make driving of cattle easier because cattle would follow the cleared route and not stray off into the trees," says the assessment, prepared by BLM range conservationist W. Paul Curtis.

According to the assessment, about 50 bulls are driven along the trail to winter range on Gravel Canyon Bench in November. They return along it to their spring range on Horse Flats in April.

The trail would be crushed down by the bulldozer, with the blade lifted from the ground to minimize disturbance of the soil. In addition, it would be blocked to vehicle access at its start with fallen trees.

James Catlin, conservation chairman of the Sierra Club's Utah Chapter, hiked the trail this past weekend. He found yellow plastic tape along the route, marking the area to be bulldozed. The present trail is well-developed and easy to hike, he said.

Catlin believes the route can be followed by cattle easily.

The Utah Wilderness Coalition — which includes both the Sierra Club and SUWA — proposed that the area be included in a BLM Utah wilderness protection bill. Also, SUWA has asked that it be protected as an area of critical environmental concern.

"The proposal never intended that to be a road," Scherick said. "It was simply a trail that would be closed off at one end."